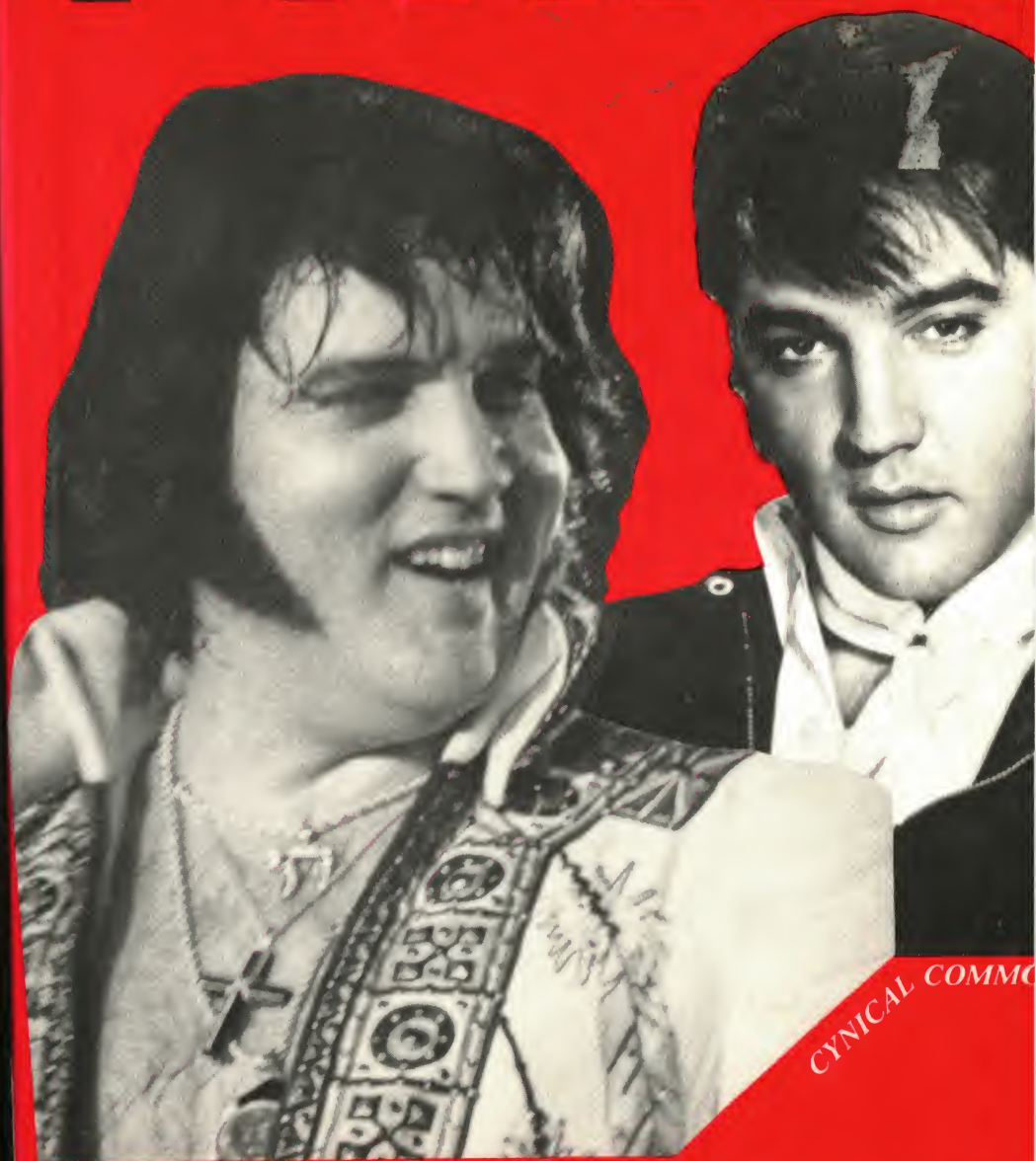


PANIC



CYNICAL COMM

ENCYCLOPEDIA

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PANIC JEANS

“Its all in your genes.” This slogan of Eugenics deconstructs its own resolute objective of genetic improvement when its pun implies that “it” — your sexuality, your identity — is all in your designer jeans. In the postmodern Americanization of the globe, Eugenics is transformed into Eu(jean)ics, a postmodern science that strives for hyperreal perfection by splicing panic genes with panic jeans. This post-fetishistic power field promises Eu(jean)ic perfectibility by deploying signifiers of radical politics in the service of simulated health, wealth, and sexual desire.

PANIC



POLO DUNGAREES

THE DUNGAREE SHIRT, JACKET, AND BLUE JEANS HAVE BEEN CRAFTED IN THE SPIRIT OF AN ERA WHEN QUALITY AND DURABILITY WERE MORE IMPORTANT THAN FASHION. CRAFTED OF FINE COTTON DENIM, THE SHIRT IS COMPLETED WITH CLOTH METAL RIVETS, AVAILABLE EITHER IN THE CLASSIC BUTTER OR POLISHED BRASS FINISH. THE TRIPLE NEEDLE STITCHING FOR ADDED DURABILITY. THE DUNGAREE JACKET IS CRAFTED FROM THE SAME COTTON DENIM, WITH A TRIPLE NEEDLE STITCHING FOR ADDED DURABILITY. THE JEANS ARE CRAFTED FROM THE SAME COTTON DENIM, WITH A TRIPLE NEEDLE STITCHING FOR ADDED DURABILITY.

POLO RALPH LAUREN

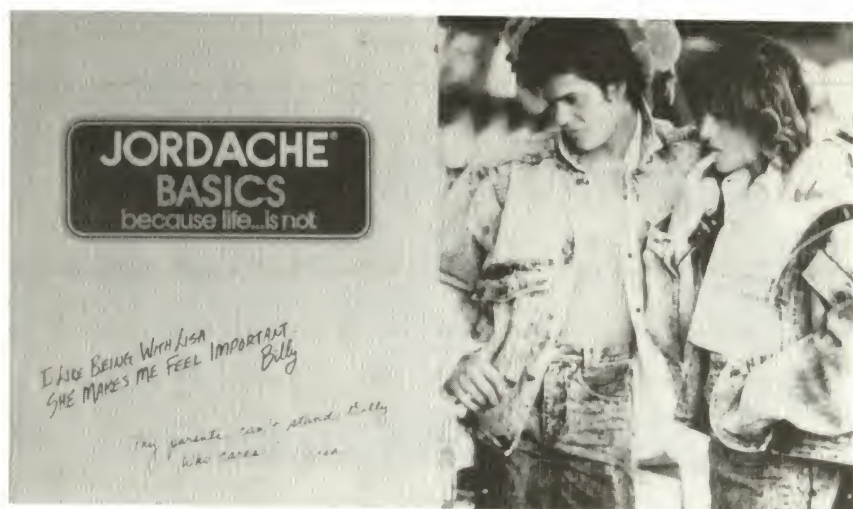
Polo Ralph Lauren

Ralph Lauren for Polo Dungarees uses the rhetoric and imagery of the “natural” in the context of the overtly simulated to appropriate not only the style of New Left politics but also that of the eu-jean company Levi Strauss. The traditional layout along an upper-left, lower-right diagonal begins the imagistic narrative with the backdrop of nature and moves down the page to the dungaree shirt and jacket and blue jeans, which, as the text informs us, “have been crafted in the spirit of an era when quality and durability were more important than fashion.” From the “metal rivet and shank buttons to the triple needle stitching for added durability,” these Ralph Laurens trade on the nineteenth century patented inventions of a Jewish immigrant tailor that made Levi’s the choice of miners, range hands, and factory workers.¹ In juxtaposition to these icons of nature and the working class, one finds signatures of wealth and aristocratic leisure — the silk tie, the natty pocket handkerchief, the faithful dog by his master’s side, the confident gaze of the privileged male. The model’s hands, firmly grasping the steering wheel of a luxury car, bear no traces of manual labor. The Polo insignia in the lower right corner neatly sums it up — in the postmodern fashionscape, one can simulate being wealthy by playfully mimicking the working class.



Esprit Jeans

Just as Ralph Lauren appropriates a New Left critique of upper-class privilege while relegitimizing it, so too Esprit uses denim to appropriate feminist critiques of class, gender, and sexuality. The black strip that crosses the model's crotch, and which thus draws attention to — even while it disrupts — the viewer's focus on sexuality, reads: "Ariel O'Donnell San Francisco, California, Age: 21 Waitress/Bartender, Non-professional AIDS Educator, Cyclist, Art Restoration Student, Anglophile, Neo-Feminist." This "information" makes the model into a "real person," a socially committed one at that, by giving us the discursive details that define her. On the right-hand page, the twelve discrete photo-like images, one with the model's face and the other eleven depicting parts of her jeans, de-center her subjectivity while conflating her identity with the details of her jeans. The text in the lower right-hand corner makes politics a matter of style by insisting that, "Because denim and jeanswear are such social equalizers today you don't necessarily need silks and satins to be elegant. . . . This new elegance has become a *de*-classification process that puts what you can do — your style and abilities far ahead of what you can afford. Now you don't have to be rich to be elegant." Esprit provides a Eu(jean)ic ideal for liberals — you can be as elegant as a capitalist and as politically conscious as a proletarian, at middle-class prices.



Jordache Basics

The Jordache series which carries the slogan "BASICS because life. . . is not" gives a Eu(jean)ics twist to the New Left's Back to Basics movement. In the BASICS ads, a "natural" landscape is displaced by the garish lights of an "urban" scene, and youthful rebellion becomes just another pose. Jordache boldly relegitimizes traditional dichotomies of sexual difference. "Defiant" teens "Billy" and "Lisa" are dressed in similar clothing, a gesture to the New Left unisex look, but their gender differences are accentuated through body posture and clothes arrangement. Lisa's skirt and her look of childishness, with her finger in her mouth, tousled hair, and off-the-shoulder, over-sized jacket reinscribes a passive and dependent fifties femininity. And Billy's open chested shirt, which exposes his dogtags and gold chains (along with his Brando/Billy Idol smirk), cocky hand-on-his-hip stance, and arm draped possessively around her neck celebrates a macho masculinity defined in opposition to her (albeit staged) vulnerability. Sexual difference is jeanetically encoded by the differences in their "handwriting": his thick, bold phallic strokes report her "feminine" devotion while her neat cursive ones record rebellion against the authority of the bourgeois family. Jordache's indiscriminate mixing of the fifties brashness, sixties anti-establishment anger, and seventies designer consciousness targets an eighties generation of Fashion(ed) teens.



Calvin Klein Sport

Eu(jean)ics virtually splices out Eugenics in the Calvin Klein sportswear domain, an imaginary territory in which bodies, health, and conduct are presumed to be beyond the “degenerescence” of inter-ethnic breeding that the bourgeoisie once found so threatening. These men and women — perfect specimens of class privilege and race supremacy — are a Eugenicist’s dream, but that dream has been reached more by the dictates of Fashion than genetic engineering. Here the pastoral pretensions of Eugenics have been relinquished for the golf course artifice of a suburban backyard or Liberal Arts College campus. Appropriation upon appropriation: these are contemporary counterparts of the “Big Chill” ensemble cast, whose laments over abandoned political activism have been diffused by *thirtysomething*’s weekly bouts of yuppie anxiety. In this “twentysomething” generation, there is little to suggest an “interiority” in keeping with nineteenth-century Eugenics. Rather, these blank screen faces, virtually interchangeable, all invested with the power of the outward gaze, are Baudrillard’s schizos, subject to the “absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things.”² Although physical contact demarcates four opposite sex couples from the remaining four figures, one woman and three men, a set of numbers that implies a variety of homosexual and heterosexual practices, in each case mirrored narcissism overrides attachment to another. This is a Eu(jean)ic simulation of desire as a thing unto itself, devoid of passion and reciprocal pleasure. In the Eu(jean)ic world, there is no referent, not even a masked one. Where there is no referent, there can be no pleasure — only cool, circulating, endless desire anesthetizing the senses through incessant stimulation.

Is the Eu(jean)ic world the world of the future? Perhaps. Perhaps not. In the splicing out of Eugenics, Calvin Klein, as Eu(jean)ic engineer, may well have produced a random fluctuation in the jeanetic code. For when desire becomes this "uncanny," it becomes mutant, and the survival of a mutation is always in question. It may be that Baudrillard's speculation will come to pass: "Once everything will have been cleansed, once an end will have been put to all viral processes and to all social and bacillary contamination, then only the virus of sadness will remain, in this universe of deadly cleanliness and sophistication."³ But it may also be that, as the precession of denim spirals into pure simulacra, a different chance encoding will occur, one that renders Eu(jean)ics susceptible to its own late-capitalist efforts to sterilize everything. Uncanny desire may be like the mule, incapable of reproduction. At a minimum, this site of jeanetic drift intervenes in the eugenic technology of power insofar as it suggests a self *sans* interiority. Such a break in the "genetic" code of humanism provides a site of resistance, a place to recode for, in Foucault's words, a "different economy of bodies and pleasure".⁴ Denim's fashionscape as an arena of struggle? By *all* means.⁵

Lee Quinby

Notes

1. Jacob Davis applied the practice of riveting and reinforcing seams in horse blankets to clothing and received the patent for these improvements (also assigned to Levi Strauss who paid the patent fee) in 1873. See Ed Cray, *LE-VIS*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978, pp. 16-22.
2. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983, p. 133.
3. Jean Baudrillard, "Rituals of Transparency," in *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schutze New York: Foreign Agents Series, Semiotext(e), 1988, p. 38.
4. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley New York: Vintage Press, 1980, p. 159.
5. I would like to thank Tom Hayes and Tim Landers for their comments and the audio-visual staff of Hobart and William Smith Colleges for their reproduction of the ads.

CultureTexts

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